

BEWARE OF ADDING SOCIAL WORK TO THE GOSPEL

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One of the hallmarks of New Evangelicalism, since its inception in the late 1940s, has been the addition of social-political work to the Great Commission. Harold Ockenga, who claimed to have coined the term “New Evangelicalism” in 1948, said it repudiated fundamentalism’s social theory. He said New Evangelicalism “had a new emphasis upon the application of the gospel to the sociological, political, and economic areas of life.”

To claim that social-political activity is part of the gospel or the Great Commission is to ignore the example given to us by the Lord’s Apostles themselves. They did not go forth and produce great social-political projects in the Roman Empire; they preached the gospel and disciplined the converts into sound churches that could reproduce and multiply the process. Period. They believed that time is short and that Christ can return at any moment, and they were not sidetracked to things of secondary importance. The unsaved can do social-political works, but only the churches can preach the gospel. If the churches turn aside to do other things, the gospel tends to be neglected.

This is exactly what we see today in the large evangelical social ministries. Christianity Today, April 23, 2001, contained a report on the Christian response to the destructive earthquake in India. It quoted nurse Glenda Moore, who is associated with the Church of the Nazarene, saying, “We know it’s not a Christian area, and WE ARE SENSITIVE NOT TO SPREAD THE GOSPEL.” But Jesus Christ has commanded us to preach the gospel to every creature, and that is precisely what the Apostle Paul attempted to do.

Tony Evans, a popular evangelical speaker today, at Urbana 2000 last December said, “Any gospel that does not speak to the issue of injustice and where people are not fed is not the gospel.” He is wrong. Jesus Christ did not commission us to go forth and correct the myriad of injustices in this present world. That is a false social gospel.

World Vision is a massive evangelical social work organization, and at its web site it plainly admits that it only preaches the gospel when it is “appropriate and desired by the community.” World Vision says that when evangelism is forbidden by government policy, “we respect this.” We would ask, when would the gospel

NOT be appropriate, and when did the Apostles draw back from preaching the gospel even if undesired by a community or if forbidden by earthly authorities? 2 Timothy 4:2 says we are to preach “in season and out of season.”

Shelter Now International is a German-based Christian social work organization that made the news in 2001 when some of its workers in Afghanistan were arrested by the Taliban regime. When asked by the media whether Afghanistan should allow missionary work, the deputy director of Shelter Now said that every country should grant religious freedom, “but it’s not our goal to do this in Afghanistan” (“Resistance to Missionaries strong in Afghanistan,” AP, Feb. 28, 2002). He was referring to preaching the gospel in a typical missionary fashion. Why is that not their goal? It is because they are content to do social work; but Jesus Christ did not say, “Go ye into all the world and build bridges.” He said, “Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature” (Mark 16:15).

Please note that I am not saying that it is wrong for Christians to assist people in this needy world. Galatians 6:10 says, “As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good unto all men, especially unto them who are of the household of faith.” This would be a much sadder world without the compassionate deeds done by God’s people. (The emphasis of the verse is on assisting those of the household of faith.)

I am simply warning that social-political work is not part of the Great Commission and should not be exalted to such a position, and that Christian social work apart from the Gospel is absolute disobedience to the Word of God.

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